DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 620 CS 217 745

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TITLE "Based on a True-Story": Using "The Ballad of Frankie Silver" To Teach the Conventions of Narrative.
PUB DATE 2000-09-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Appalachian Teachers' Network Conference (Radford University, VA, September 9, 2000).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ferrum.edu/thanlon/truestory.htm.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Fiction; Historical Interpretation; *Literary Devices; *Literature Appreciation; *Nonfiction; Secondary Education; *Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS *Narrative Text; Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

The distinction between fiction and nonfiction focuses on the aspect of literature teachers usually emphasize when teaching it to students: content. It is equally important, however, for students to understand the "mechanics" of literature, including how a writer crafts his or her material and how the text establishes expectations in a reader. Examining a narrative drawn from fact, such as Sharyn McCrumb's 1998 novel, "The Ballad of Frankie Silver," can deepen students' understanding of what writers do, how writing works, and why literature matters. The story operates on two levels, and by weaving together the two, McCrumb has created a unique work which bridges the fact/fiction gap. This paper shows how a reader of "The Ballad of Frankie Silver" can explore differences in the purpose, technique, and reader response of fictional and nonfictional material in one book. The paper recounts the novel's origins in a true story of an 1832 murder in North Carolina and discusses another book with the same theme, "The Untold Story of Frankie Silver" by Perry Deane Young. It recommends having students read and compare both books. The paper suggests that students scrutinize how McCrumb weaves primary written sources into her text, noting that they can learn a lot about how narrative is shaped and the decisions a writer makes in shaping it from examination of the original materials. It discusses in detail several aspects of the plot. The paper reiterates that reading McCrumb's novel and Young's book and examining original case materials can help students understand the workings of narrative, including theme, point of view, and multi-layered plots, as well as readers' differing expectations for fiction and nonfiction. (NKA)

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by Lana Whited

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"Based on a True-Story": Using *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* to Teach the Conventions of Narrative

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Presented at the September 2000
Appalachian Teachers' Network Conference

Most students probably think of fictional and nonfictional literature as water drawn from two very different wells: fiction from the writer's imagination and nonfiction from the "real" life of the writer or someone else. This distinction between fiction and nonfiction focuses on the aspect of literature we usually emphasize when teaching it to students: content. However, it is equally important for students to understand the *mechanics* of literature, including how a writer crafts his or her material and how the text establishes expectations in a reader. Examining a narrative drawn from fact, such as Sharyn McCrumb's 1998 novel *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, can deepen students' understanding of what writers do, how writing works, and why literature matters.

McCrumb's book operates in two layers. The outer layer is the story of Spencer Arrowood, sheriff of Wake County, Tennessee, who has been invited to the execution of Fate Harkryder. Arrowood's investigation and testimony helped send Harkryder to death row, but with the execution invitation in hand, the sheriff begins to question Harkryder's guilt. His musings remind him of a story told to him by his predecessor Nelse Miller in a North Carolina hillside cemetery – the story of Frankie Silver, who was hanged for murder in Morganton, N.C., on July 12, 1833. Miller told Arrowood, "There's only two murder cases in these mountains that I'm not happy with. . . . One is the fellow you're about to put on death row. And the other one is Frankie Silver" (15).

The Arrowood story is essentially the product of McCrumb's imagination, and the Stewart-Silver story is the result of her painstaking research. By weaving together the two, McCrumb has created a unique work which bridges the fact/fiction gap. Thus, a reader of *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* can explore differences in the purpose, technique, and reader response of fictional and nonfictional material in *one* book.

On January 10, 1832, 18-year-old Frances Stewart Silver, her mother Barbara and brother Blackston were taken to jail in Morganton, accused of the murder of Frankie's husband Charlie, whom Frankie reported missing on December 23, 1831. Barbara and Blackston Stewart were released seven days after their arrest, due to lack of evidence, but in March 1832, Frankie was indicted by a Burke County grand jury, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged in July. An unsuccessful appeal to the North Carolina Supreme Court and a change of local judges delayed the execution, and she was finally hanged on July 12, 1833.

Interest in the Frankie Silver story was revived in the late 1990s, when the only two book-length works devoted to the material were published, both in 1998. The same year, Appalachian filmmaker Tom Davenport released a documentary on the case, produced in conjunction with the University of North Carolina Folklore Curriculum. In addition to *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, the fifth book in Sharyn McCrumb's "ballad novel" series, the year brought *The Untold Story of Frankie Silver* by Chapel Hill, N.C., journalist Perry Deane Young. Interestingly, both McCrumb and Young have ties to the case: McCrumb is a distant cousin of Frankie Silver (on the Stewart side), and Young is a native of Burke County whose ancestors there pre-date Frankie Silver's trial and execution.

An important distinction must be made between McCrumb's and Young's work. While their research involved many of the same documents and interviews, as well as footwork along the same paths, their results are very different. McCrumb's book , as its cover attests, is a novel. While McCrumb's research into the Frankie Silver case formed the basis for her inner story, the plot involving the impending

execution of Lafayette "Fate" Harkryder in the late 20th century is fictional. McCrumb's overall purpose in using two narrative layers is to contrast "poor people as defendants and rich people as officers of the court, . . . Celt versus English values in developing America, . . . mountain people versus the 'flatlanders' in any culture" (384). Through this contrast, McCrumb hopes to underscore the common theme of Frankie Silver's and Fate Harkryder's stories: that, in the words of the book's epigram (from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*), "The rich never hang; only the poor and friendless." Theme, then, is the overriding concern of *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*.

Young's book, by contrast, is primarily devoted to accuracy and establishing "The Untold Story" of the case. Young aims to correct over 150 years of fabulous legend engendered by Frankie Silver's story. The structure of his book reinforces this purpose, as he begins by spinning out a yarn about the young woman which he claims is much like the tales told before Western North Carolina mountain hearths since the notorious crime. Then, in the book's longest section, "The Search for Facts about Frankie and Charlie Silver," he provides a virtual reference book about the case. The chapter headings in this section reinforce his aim: "The Silvers," "The Stewarts," "Morganton Then," "The Members of the Court," "The Escape," and so forth. After thoroughly reviewing the case, Young deals with the ballad itself – the song Frankie Silver was erroneously reported to have sung from the gallows. Section IV of Young's book consists of original documents related to the case, such as newspaper accounts, court documents, and letters and petitions soliciting Frankie's clemency. The book ends with a three-page bibliography. Ultimately, Young's book examines the tension between fact and folklore. It would be a useful reference for a student reading McCrumb's novel.

Having students compare McCrumb's and Young's purposes would be a worthwhile exercise highlighting the aims of fiction. For that reason, the optimum experience for students would be reading both books. If this is impossible, literature students who had read *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* could examine some contrasting elements between it and *The Untold Story of Frankie Silver* simply by examining Young's table of contents, which could be easily photocopied. (By contrast, students in a social studies class who had read Young's book could examine how individual episodes are dramatized in McCrumb's novel). A teacher could start a meaningful discussion by asking students to consider why Young's book includes such a table while McCrumb's does not, and how the answer to that question reflects the writers' differing purposes.

Whether or not students also read Young's book, a teacher could also ask them to contrast the two titles and explain what they expect from each book. Even students inexperienced in literary criticism should see that Young's title, *The Untold Story* . . . promises to deliver truths as yet unrevealed, while McCrumb's *The Ballad of* . . . leads readers to expect something more literary or artistic, a rendering of the facts, rather than just the facts themselves. This question should be asked *before* students have read either book, to get a true impression of the expectations raised by the titles. When I teach *In Cold Blood*, I always ask students to stop on the third page and explain what they think Truman Capote means when he describes "four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives" (15). After the usual jokes about bullets passing through people and into others, some students in the class can always guess that Capote may be referring to murders followed by legal executions. If nothing else, they are intrigued to read on in order to learn how the "four into six" equation works out. Research into reading comprehension suggests that students who get the most out of a text consciously or intuitively apply pre-reading strategies. Major prescribed systems for reading, such as "PQ3R" or "SQ3R," [1] always begin with the stage of previewing or surveying a text. Asking students to discuss the title and front material before delving into the story would reinforce the importance of the often-overlooked stages of previewing and questioning.

Also, before reading very far into the story, students should be asked whether knowing that a story is based on fact changes their feelings about reading it. Do they take the story any more seriously than one they don't know to be true, for example? Students have enough experience with movies based on factual events to be able to draw some parallels in answering this question. Alternately, *The Blair Witch Project* phenomenon during the summer of 1999 can provide a useful corollary, as many viewers of that film regarded and discussed it as though it were a true story (a misperception which the film's official website encouraged). [2]

Teachers should ask such questions before students begin their reading and again when they have completed the book, to provide students an opportunity to talk about whether and how their perceptions have changed. After completing the book, students should be prepared for more difficult questions: In encouraging viewers of *The Blair Witch Project* to view the film as fact-based, are the promoters suggesting that the film would be more valuable if the story were true? If so, does the same principle apply to a novel? In other words, would *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* be less valuable or "good" if it were all a product of Sharyn McCrumb's imagination? Is the Frankie Silver story of greater worth than the Fate Harkryder plot because hers is true and his is not? Do we view or judge a work differently after learning that it is not true? Is there a kind of truth which is different from factuality? (Here I have in mind the concept of verisimilitude.) A teacher's ultimate goal in such a discussion is to get students to make some generalizations about how their expectations for fiction and nonfiction are different.

An important aspect of reading *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* for a student should be scrutinizing how McCrumb weaves primary written sources into her text. These fall primarily into two categories: court documents and letters. Three court documents are reproduced in the text, including the following: an arrest warrant naming "Frankey [sic] Silver and Barbara and Blackston Stewart" [3] (signed Jan. 9, 1832, p. 27); a writ of habeas corpus issued after Frankie's father, Isaiah Stewart, complained that his daughter, wife, and son had not been formally charged (dated Jan. 13, 1832, p. 72); and the denial of Frankie's appeal to the North Carolina Supreme Court, a three-sentence document which arrived in Morganton in July 1832 (222).

In addition, McCrumb reproduces the text of four original letters. The first is from David Newland, owner of the stagecoach line which carried people and news back and forth from Morganton to Raleigh. Newland's letter, written on Sept. 6, 1832, to governor Montfort Stokes, was accompanied by a petition containing 113 names (including those of four jurors) and declaring Frankie Silver "a fit subject for excitive [sic] Clemency" (226). The second letter is from Silver's attorney Thomas Wilson to the governor, dated Nov. 19, 1832, informing him that Frankie had gotten the impression from Newland's petition that she would be pardoned and asking if the governor had reached a decision (235-36). A letter dated June 29, 1833, from Mary E. Erwin to Governor David L. Swain (who succeeded Stokes), encouraged Swain to pardon Frankie on the grounds that Charlie Silver's "treatment of her was both unbecoming and cruel verry[sic] often" and that the condemned woman had a young child (276-77). McCrumb writes, "Appended to this carefully wrought document were the signatures of nearly every gentlewoman in [Burke] county" (277). The fourth letter is a reply of three (albeit long) sentences from Governor Swain, who claims his reply will arrive too late to save Frankie Silver and that all he can do is hope "that she may find that mercy in Heaven which seemed to be necessarily denied upon earth" (284). Swain's reply, dated July 9, 1833, was apparently timed to arrive in Morganton on the eve of the execution, too late for anyone to inform him that there was still time for a pardon.

Students reading *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* should be encouraged to examine how McCrumb works each original document into the text. For example, after she reproduces Governor Swain's letter, the author concludes that chapter with dialogue between Clerk Gaither and W.C. Bevins, author of a letter accompanying a recent petition (late June 1833). The point of this imagined conversation is Gaither's and Bevins' confusion over how Swain could have thought he lacked the time to pardon Frankie Silver. McCrumb's purpose is clearly to expose Swain's underhanded tactics. The chapter concludes with Gaither's question, "why equivocate with this pretended misunderstanding of dates? Why did he not simply say, *I refuse to pardon the prisoner*"[?] and Bevins' reply, "He has said it, Mr. Gaither. As plainly as any politician ever spoke" (285). Examination of the context McCrumb sets around these original documents can help students understand how a writer can use factual material for rhetorical aims.

In a number of instances, McCrumb refers to or draws upon original materials which she does not reproduce verbatim. An interesting discussion might involve why she chooses to include some explicitly and make overt reference to others. For example, before the prisoner leaves the jail for the gallows, Burgess Gaither informs her that he is required to re-read the judge's order for her death.

However, the text of this document is not repeated at this point, probably because it is Gaither's reaction which McCrumb wants to highlight. "I found that the paper was shaking as I began to read from it," the clerk says, "and it was then that I realized I was as unstrung as the rest of them" (311). If an officer of the court is "unstrung" by the impending execution, surely that execution is questionable. Again, McCrumb arranges her material for the desired effect, which the reading of a document in eighteenth-century legalese might destroy.

Another interesting omission is McCrumb's decision to paraphrase events concerning the bill of indictment against Frankie. Clearly, the reading of the charges, a document of 383 words all in *one* sentence, marked a pivotal stage of the legal proceedings. On its reverse side were the words, "A true bill as to Francis Silver. Not True Bill as to the others" (Young, "Untold" 134). Thus, it dismisses the charges against Frankie's family members – a development whose relevance grows as a reader learns more about the crime. Despite its significance, McCrumb does not reproduce it. Instead, she focuses on the political context of the charges – Sheriff Sam Tate's concern that none of the suspects will be convicted if all are charged. Thus, McCrumb paraphrases the brief statement on the back of the indictment to Tate's decision, "Here's what I propose that we do, boys: we bring back a true bill on Mrs. Frances Silver, and we no-bill her mother and brother. We know she's in it up to her neck, and I'd rather see her punished for her crime than cast the net too wide and risk losing all three" (126-27). Again, McCrumb focuses attention on the political backdrop of the case, reinforcing the focus on Frankie as scapegoat for a guilty family.

It is also important for students to understand that historical facts can be unclear and that two different writers can make conflicting decisions about representing history. For example, a major controversy in the Frankie Silver material is the question of who defended the young woman, as her attorney is not named in court documents. Perry Young says that Thomas Wilson was Frankie Silver's sole solicitor and the notion that she was represented by Woodfin is "one of the more common errors in the stories that have been published" (18). However, Sharyn McCrumb has Frankie defended by the well known and flamboyant Asheville attorney Nicholas Woodfin, with Morganton resident Thomas Wilson as co-counsel. McCrumb explains in her afterword that a North Carolina district attorney's explanation of 1830s criminal law convinced her of the accuracy of her account (382-83). Having students examine these conflicting accounts and review the basis for each could be a valuable lesson in the use of sources. Students should also discuss the fact that some disagreements about historical fact may be unresolved or unresolvable, particularly in a case such as Frankie Silver's, as her attorney is not named in primary documents.

Finally, from the use of original materials and the dual-time perspective in *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, students can learn something about the style or texture of narrative. In the present-day plot, characters talk like we do today, with the occasional East Tennessee mountains flavor of lines such as, "Afternoon, Miz Bonesteel! I've come to sit a spell" (20) and "I reckon it's too late to put the lights out and pretend we're not here" (48). In the 1830s plot, however, McCrumb faces the challenge of recreating the speech of both an educated, upper-middle-class man and an unschooled mountain girl. She must write, for Burgess Gaither, lines such as "When my expression did not change, the constable must have realized that such rustic deductions were wasted upon gentlemen, for we lacked the requisite frontier skills to recognize the significance of that discovery" (39). And just a few pages later, she must have Frankie thinking, "I see you looking at me, Constable Charlie Baker. I know you of old. Your daddy fought in the Revolution, and your brother is the justice of the peace, so you have land and position, but for all that you are a runty fellow with never a smile for ary soul" (41). Comparing the language of characters of differing dialects and speech habits can help students to understand the concept of voice in writing , how writer achieves a character's voice, and how (and why) one character's voice is different from another's. [4]

It is also valuable for students to know that dialect in fiction is often frowned upon by New York editors and literary agents. While McCrumb uses some aspects of dialect in *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, such as Frankie's use of the word "ary" for "any," the writing is not heavily dialectal, even in the speech of the characters most likely to use dialect. Students should also be asked to talk about how much the speech of characters like Frankie may be standardized or even romanticized. Where, for example, does a reader find Frankie using an expression she wouldn't likely use or a word she

wouldn't likely know? William Faulkner said of his novel *The Sound and the Fury* that he gave the mentally retarded boy-man Benjy Compson the language he would have used, if he could articulate his own experience. Similarly, students should consider where Sharyn McCrumb might lend language to Frankie Silver, so that the mountain girl/woman can express her experience more vividly, or with literary effect. A related and equally important point is how a fiction writer avoids stereotyping or patronizing a character through the representation of language.

Students can learn a lot about how narrative is shaped and the decisions a writer makes in shaping it from examination of the original materials and how McCrumb works them into the novel. The materials not reproduced in the book are readily available, without a trip to the Morganton courthouse or the North Carolina archives. Young reproduces all the relevant documents in Part IV of his book, and a website created and maintained by Frankie Silver's great-great-great granddaughter in Georgia includes facsimiles and transcriptions of the Complaint and Arrest Warrant, the Bill of Indictment, and the Writ of Habeas Corpus. Thus, the documents could be easily printed and reproduced for student examination – or students could be encouraged to put their Internet skills to use and retrieve the documents themselves. The web site *Frankie Stewart Silver's Memorial Page* includes gravesite photos and other interesting information about the case (www.frankiesilver.com). A good starting point for Internet research on the case is *Frankie Silver Resources* (www.ferrum.edu/lwhited/silver.htm). [5]

By examining similarities between the fictional and nonfictional accounts of the case, students can also be encouraged to see some basic priniciples of all narrative. For example, a fictional story such as McCrumb's Fate Harkryder plot in *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* which springs primarily from the writer's imagination may still involve substantial research. McCrumb, in her afterword, acknowledges the assistance of an attorney, a law enforcement officer, and a death row inmate in helping her establish the complexity of a capital case, particularly an execution. McCrumb also visited Riverbend, a maximum-security prison in Nashville which houses Tennessee's death row (383-84). A teacher should point out these acknowledgements in the afterword to call students' attention to McCrumb's attempt to achieve verisimilitude. Students can also be encouraged to pick out selections in the text which are probably based on research, such as McCrumb's explanation of the origin of Tennessee's electric chair toward the end of Chapter 1 (21-23). This exercise in the origin of information can help novice readers understand how narrative is made. Students should also note that McCrumb included the afterword and bibliography, whose presence can lead to a discussion about acknowledgement of sources, even in a fictional work.

In addition, students should be asked why McCrumb didn't place her acknowledgements at the beginning of the book. Such placement might have given away important plot details, and this answer can open the door to a discussion of suspense, an important aspect of all narrative. Whether a novel is based primarily on historical material or the writer's imagination, the shape of the narrative will be largely the same, beginning with an exposition which features a complication, then rising in action to a point of climax, followed by a denouement. Throughout this process, a writer wants to keep a reader guessing. Students should be encouraged to apply the basic plot outline to both McCrumb's outer and inner plots, and then to go a step further: to actually diagram the two plots in a parallel fashion, on the same page or two separate pages laid side by side. This step will allow students to see how major developments in one plot correspond to those in the other. (This diagramming is particularly useful to visual learners.)

The best example of this parallel plot technique occurs late in the novel, when Sheriff Spencer Arrowood visits the location of the Silvers' cabin with Nora Bonesteel, relying on Nora's gift of "the sight" to help him understand the murder of Charlie Silver. Arrowood realizes that Frankie must have had help from her family in dismembering Charlie and cleaning up the crime scene and that it was probably this help her father urged her to keep secret in his admonition "Die with it in you!" as she stood on the gallows. The sheriff is then able to figure out that Fate Harkryder is also taking the blame, because he was a minor, for a crime his brothers almost certainly committed. At this point in the narrative, Arrowood has already assembled all the facts he needs to understand both cases, but it is not until he stands near the Silver cabin's hearthstone that he is able to put in the final pieces and see the whole puzzle – or, more appropriately, both puzzles. By the end of the chapter, Arrowood

articulates the connection between the two cases that a reader has already glimpsed. Arrowood says, "I think I understand what bothered Nelse Miller about the case now. I know why Frankie Silver has been on my mind" (352). At this point, he actively begins trying to save Fate Harkryder. In the very next chapter, Fate Harkryder is presented with an opportunity to avoid dying with his knowledge in him, and his refusal to implicate his brothers suggests that the golden rule in mountain families of protecting one's blood kin has not changed in 155 years. McCrumb's novel is ultimately the story of two young people sacrificed on the altar of this mountain code.

But in encouraging students to see parallels between the two plots, a teacher wouldn't want to start near the end of the novel. They are plenty of earlier examples. Nora Bonesteel is introduced in Chapter One, when Pauline Harkryder visits her to confirm her own intuition that her nephew Fate is innocent and to learn whether intervention might be fruitful. In a masterful association, McCrumb moves a reader along from the power of Bonesteel's "sight" to the current of the Tennessee electric chair, a power that threatens to transform Fate. The chapter ends with a few examples of prison folklore about "Old Sparky," such as how the chair is tested once a month. This brief disquisition on modern-day execution ends with the word "legend," and the reader turns the page to confront the sentence, "I remember the first time I ever heard of Frankie Silver" (24). Thus, McCrumb establishes the connection between the question of Fate Harkryder's innocence and the Silver case.

After the chapter detailing Frankie's arrest, McCrumb cuts back to a chapter in which Spencer Arrowood recalls the crimes for which Fate Harkryder was convicted (47-48). At this point in the narrative, Arrowood's deputy Martha Ayers intrudes, bringing a Mrs. Honeycutt whom she has conveniently met at the public library while looking for the Frankie Silver materials Arrowood has requested. On the heels of the sheriff's recollection of the earlier crime, Mrs. Honeycutt (a native of Western N.C.) spins out the tale of Frankie and Charlie Silver (50-54). Chapter Three concludes with Fate Harkryder pondering all the lawyers he's had during his legal proceedings, and in the next 1830s chapter, when McCrumb cuts back to Burgess Gaither, the case against Frankie Silver has proceeded to the point of "Choosing Counsel" (the chapter title, 104). Such parallels continue throughout the novel, and mapping them would help students understand how McCrumb juxtaposes the details of her two plots.

Contrasting the two narrative levels of *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* can also be an education in point of view. Frankie Silver's story is narrated in first person by Burgess Gaither, the young Burke County clerk of court. Students should be prodded to see that Gaither is an appropriate narrator because he is socioeconomically somewhere between the upstanding, affluent Erwins of Morganton and the "hillbilly" Stewarts. Gaither describes himself as "an outsider in the ranks of the aristocracy" (319). Also, as court clerk, he is always present at the crucial milestones in Frankie's case and thus can report them with first-hand knowledge. It would also be useful to have students briefly discuss why other characters in the 1830s plot would be inferior to Gaither as narrators. The attorneys, for example, are too biased to be trustworthy narrators, and none of the female characters would have had sufficient access to events at that time to know what Gaither knows. It is also noteworthy that Gaither was very close to Frankie Silver's age at the time of her trial, making him a suitable contemporary. Finally, only a character with the benefit of Gaither's education and social standing could portray both sides of the socioeconomic gulf which is McCrumb's main theme.

The Spencer Arrowood/Fate Harkryder plot is told by a third-person omniscient narrator, usually (but not exclusively) limited to Arrowood's point of view. During the sheriff's attempt to piece together the stories of Frankie Silver and Fate Harkryder, a reader inhabits his consciousness, and it would be worthwhile to have students talk about what this perspective contributes. In this discussion, it is important to ask students to consider Arrowood as a stand-in for a reader also trying to sort out the details of both cases. They should also be encouraged to see the sheriff as a surrogate for the novelist herself. McCrumb told an interviewer in 1997, "I've always been somebody who was looking for patterns. I have . . . a comparative sort of mind. . . . The searching for patterns is always the first step toward telling stories" (McCrumb, Interview). It seems especially true that the novelist drawing on historical materials should be looking for patterns – in McCrumb's case, patterns of justice – or injustice – in two mountain murder cases 150 years apart, one real, one fictional.

A further study in point of view could be undertaken by asking students to examine the brief interludes when readers are given Frankie's and Fate's perspectives. In several 1830s chapters, a reader is treated to Frankie's first-person reactions to the events around her. These passages are italicized in the text and placed at the ends of chapters. Interestingly, McCrumb withholds Frankie's point of view during four entire sections covering her trial, conviction, sentencing, and appeal. A reader does not hear from Frankie directly from page 139, when her lawyer is selected, until her notorious escape, narrated in a section which begins on page 252. Students should be encouraged to think about the reasons for the silence and to see its consistency with the historical fact that Frankie did not testify on her own behalf.

Harkryder's thoughts, also generally placed at the ends of the present-day chapters, are related via a third-person omniscient narrator. It is worth pointing out to students that in her selection of Harkryder's thoughts, McCrumb is careful never to do more than hint at the secret Spencer Arrowood has not yet learned. When Harkryder is introduced in Chapter Two, his gaze lingers over a picture of his brothers, Tom and Ewell, and after twenty years in the penitentiary, he feels rage that his brothers are free. He considers recanting his confession but feels that "Nobody cared about the truth anymore" (60-61). Fate Harkryder and Frankie Silver's backgrounds and circumstances are so similar that when McCrumb writes, "I'm a poor, dumb hillbilly, Sheriff. Why should anybody bother to keep me alive?" a reader has to back up a few lines to see which character is speaking. Ultimately, Frankie Silver comes off as the more sympathetic of the two, and students can have a valuable discussion about how much the first-person narratives contribute to a reader's feelings for her.

Getting students to discuss McCrumb's double-barreled method should ultimately help them to understand the connections among all the major elements of narrative, to understand, for example, how the plot structure can emphasize the theme. More questions can prompt students to make these connections: Why does McCrumb yoke together the stories of Frankie Silver and Fate Harkryder? How does she structure each plot in order to emphasize the similarities? How does her selection of point of view complement the questions of guilt vs. innocence at the heart of the novel? Why does the novel end with *two* executions? In other words, why doesn't McCrumb, in the fictional plot, permit Spencer Arrowood to rescue Fate Harkryder? Why doesn't the knowledge he has gained from figuring out Frankie Silver's story save Harkryder? What – or who – intervenes? Answering these questions will help students understand that a narrative is an orchestration of many elements, working together to produce a particular effect.

As I mentioned previously, suspense is an important element of narrative, but unraveling the plot is not the only reason readers read novels. In the case of *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, some readers may already be familiar with details of the case from folklore or local history. Students should be asked to consider what, for these readers, is the value of McCrumb's novel. Readers commonly read narratives based on historical events, expecting authors who have conducted research to provide context and explanation. Even when readers know the facts of an event, we still want to understand why the event occurred and, if it was regrettable, how it might have been avoided or be averted in the future. This is particularly true where violence is concerned, a fact which accounts for the proliferation of the New Journalism in the 1960s. For example, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977; based on reporting which began in 1968) helped explain the violence of Vietnam, John Hersey's *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968) helped explain race-related violence, and *In Cold Blood* (1965) helped explain how violence increasingly encroached on ordinary families.

Despite some disagreement about the facts of Frankie Silver's case, Sharyn McCrumb and Perry Deane Young see similar meanings in her story. For both writers, Frankie is at least as much victim as victimizer. For Young, she is the victim of poor legal strategy. Young has argued quite convincingly that when Frankie's attorney sought to get her acquitted rather than to reduce the charge to nonpremeditated murder, he made a grave mistake. Young maintains that Frankie "would have been found guilty of nothing worse than manslaughter or justifiable homicide if the details of the murder had ever been presented to the jury. . . . She was barred from testifying . . . but there was no reason [her lawyer] could not have explained to the jury that she had killed her husband in self defense" (e-mail). Both Young and McCrumb emphasize evidence that Frankie was also the victim of governors who barely troubled themselves to understand her case.

Perhaps most importantly, Young and McCrumb both see Frankie as a victim of her husband, Charlie. Young says that "there were plenty of witnesses to prove he'd abused her" (e-mail), and McCrumb develops this thread in crafting Frankie's confession, a copy of which has never been located (269-72). In McCrumb's version, Frankie emphasizes "Charlie liked to get drunk, and the liquor turned him mean" (270). The fact that the young woman probably killed her husband during a moment of real or perceived threat to herself or her child also makes her, ultimately, the victim of the state of North Carolina and of a miscarriage of justice.

In the late 1990s, a group of Morganton schoolchildren wrote to North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt, asking him to issue a pardon of forgiveness on Frankie Silver's behalf (Davenport). Although the pardon was denied after an investigation into the case, the schoolchildren's act demonstrates the value of teaching young people about Frankie Silver and helping them learning to sort fact from fiction and to know the value of each.

The experience of reading Sharyn McCrumb's novel and Perry Young's book and examining original case materials can help students understand the workings of narrative, including theme, point of view, and multi-layered plots, as well as readers' differing expectations for fiction and nonfiction. Comparing primary sources against the way they may be dramatized by a fiction writer can enlighten students as to the uses of history and the difference between historical fact and literary truth or verisimilitude. And students' acquaintance with the 1830s legal system can provide them both a contrast with the present system concerning such matters as whether or not a defendant testifies on her own behalf and a comparison with contemporary events such as increased skepticism about the death penalty. Such study also reinforces the importance of active citizenship, as the Morganton citizens who petitioned the governor on Frankie Silver's behalf were probably, in some cases, the ancestors of the children who recently petitioned Governor Hunt. Finally, examining *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* – or any similar work – through the method suggested here will also make students better critical readers in general, and the multimedia and multidisciplinary natures of the assignment should address another important element of education – student motivation. If studying a novel can provide such a range of benefits, then literature is very valuable, indeed.

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Footnotes

[1] The stages in PQ3R and SQ3R vary slightly, depending on study skills texts. The sequence of letters generally represents Preview (or Survey), Question, Read, Recite, and Review.

[2] Besides *The Blair Witch Project*, which a majority of young people have probably seen, many other films are based on a blending of fact and fiction. *Titanic* and *Amistad* are prominent examples. In addition, it is interesting that filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen provide a note in the opening credits of their film *Fargo* that it is "based on a true story," even though the routine "Any resemblance to any persons living or dead . . ." disclaimer appears at the end. Students might be asked, regarding *The Blair Witch Project* and *Fargo*, why filmmakers would want to give a film the appearance of being factual when it is not.

[3] McCrumb standardizes the language of the original warrant. For example, she changes the spelling to Stewart from Stuard, as it appears on the original warrant, and standardizes the spelling of Elijah Green's name.

[4] For students unfamiliar with the dialects of the Western North Carolina mountains, teachers could show Tom Davenport's film *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, a documentary featuring Western North Carolina native Bobby McMillon, a musician and storyteller. McMillon's speech is characterized by many aspects of a dialect similar in its origins to Frankie Silver's.

[5] This web site was created by the author in May 2000 with funding from the Appalachian College Association. It may be accessed directly via the URL or from the ACA's web site at www.acaweb.org.

This page's last update: 10/5/00

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